# When and How to Choose a Marriage Counselor

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Lately Bob and Jane had been having quite a few disagreements in their marriage. Up until now it never would have dawned on them that they might have had a marital problem, least of all a financial problem.

It all started one night when Bob and Jane returned home from a movie. Bob told his wife about his plans to make a rather risky investment which he felt could triple their income in just a few years. Jane vehemently disagreed with the plan, and she spared no words in making her views known to Bob. At first they thought that they were simply having a minor disagreement over the age old question of whether to save or invest, but the problem continued. It went into

weeks and then months. They were becoming totally preoccupied with their conflict. It began to effect other areas of their life. Their sexual contacts decreased because they were irritable and they became quite impatient with the children.

## Marriage Problems Seldom Obvious

They realized that they were losing control of the problem and it was growing out of proportion; yet, they both felt powerless to do anything about it. This is when they decided to go to a marriage counselor, hoping that the counselor could provide them with an objective look at their problem.

After just a few visits to the marriage counselor, they began to realize that money was not their problem at all but only the symptom. What Bob and Jane had really been arguing about was security. They each used money as a symbol of security, and each of them went about trying to achieve security in a different way. Bob tried to achieve it by investing

his money. This would not only increase his wealth, but it would also make him feel like an aggressive and active member of the business world. Jane tried to attain security by maintaining a safe cushion in the bank, which she felt would insure their present standard of living.

Once they realized that money was a sign of security for them, they began to re-evaluate their goals and to redefine what money meant in their lives. They were well on their way, thanks to the assistance of the marriage counselor, to not only resolving this particular problem but to deepening their understanding of themselves and each other.

## Counselor Provides Objectivity

A marriage counselor provides a couple with objectivity. As an outsider the counselor has the advantage of viewing a problem without the emotional involvement and prejudices that the couple, their parents, and their friends might have. A marriage counselor is much like the spotter at a football game who sits

high in the stadium and observes the entire field of play in one glance. The spotter can pick out the weak spots and strong points in the opposing team's defense and relay the findings down to the players on the field. The players do not have the luxury of this overall view; they are too involved on the ground level to see the action the way the spotter sees it. This objectivity is the main advantage in seeking a marriage counselor.

## Different Kinds of Counselors

There are probably more marriage counselors in your community than you realize. They are men and women from a number of different professions who have specialized in the dynamics of marriage and all the complexities of the behavior and communication patterns that go to make up the marital relationship. A marriage counselor can be a psychiatrist, who is a medical doctor, a psychologist usually with a Ph.D. degree, a psychiatric social worker with a Master of Social Work degree. They are trained in

the development of the individual and in the psychological and sociological aspects of marriage, the family, and society.

## Private Practice, Public Agency

These marriage counselors work in private practice or public agencies. There are advantages and disadvantages to both. A person who goes to a marriage counselor in private practice has the advantage of choosing the particular counselor whom he or she wishes to see; however, the fee is somewhat higher than at public agencies. When people choose to go to a public agency, such as a Catholic Service Bureau, a community mental health center, or the Family Service Association of America, they are usually assigned a counselor. The advantage here, however, is that the fee is determined by the couple's income and number of people in the family.

There is no significant difference in the competence of a marriage counselor in a private practice and one in a public

agency. It is solely up to the individual to weigh the advantages and disadvantages and choose where to go.

Marriage counselors differ in technique, style, philosophy, and personality. Some take a very active role in the therapy. Others permit clients to choose their own direction. There are those who prefer to see married couples individually, while others choose to see them together. If time and circumstances permit, they may even be seen in large groups of four or five couples at a time.

## Find a Counselor You Can Trust

Ask around. Priests, doctors, lawyers, and maybe even some friends of yours, who have had the opportunity to be in marriage counseling, can recommend a good marriage counselor. The important thing to remember here is that the best marriage counselor for you is one with whom you can feel comfortable and trust. One word of caution. Many states do not have licensing laws for marriage counselors, and you are well within your

rights to ask about a counselor's qualifications. People can usually feel confident if they choose marriage counselors from the field of psychiatry, psychology, or social work.

Marriage is complex because those who marry are themselves so complicated. We all have our needs, and we all experience frustration when these needs are not met. In marriage with two people living so intimately, each with their own individual needs and frustrations, the relationship at times can become quite perplexing. Very often the needs of one partner may conflict with the needs of the other, and one person's need may be the other's frustration, as was seen in the case of Bob and Jane.

## Counseling a Sign of Strength

Maybe the realization of the complexities of marriage has changed society's thinking so that it is no longer a stigma today to see a professional counselor. More and more people are turning to marriage counselors for assistance,

going on their lunch hours or in the evening after work. In recent years significant progress has been made in the study of marriage and the family. The benefits of this research are now available through marriage counseling.

While it may seem prudent to take advantage of this knowledge, many couples still feel that asking for assistance means that they cannot solve their own problems. How many times do we discuss our problems with friends who may give us encouragement but who do not have the knowledge or experience of a trained marriage counselor?

## Beware the Instant Cure-All

A good marriage counselor, you can be sure, will not solve your problems for you. He or she will not deny you the satisfaction of solving it yourself. The aim is to help you clarify the problem, mobilize your resources, and use your strengths to meet it. In a sense the counselor will not only be helping you solve your immediate problem, but will actually be showing

you how you can resolve many other conflicts you may encounter in the future. To recognize the need for help is a sign of strength rather than inadequacy.

## What to Look Forward To

Even if going to a marriage counselor does not provoke feelings of inadequacy in you, there still may be some initial embarrassment or awkwardness. This is quite understandable, and a sensitive marriage counselor with any experience at all will be aware of this uncomfortable feeling. Discussing this feeling of embarrassment, working it through, and establishing a relationship with the counselor is actually the first step in therapy. A good counselor should be able to alleviate most of your initial discomfort about being there in the first session.

As you enter the office of a marriage counselor, you can expect to see a familiar sight, which you have seen many times before in doctors' and dentists' offices, a waiting room and a receptionist. You may be surprised that there is no

couch on which you must lie down for your treatment. Most of the counseling is done in upright chairs. The sessions last roughly from 45 minutes to an hour, usually on a weekly basis. This is flexible, however, depending on the couple's need and the counselor's style of therapy.

The marriage counselor will want to know as much as possible about you and your problem. He or she will want to know when it started, what you have done about it so far, and most of all, how it makes you feel. This is where so much of the crucial work is done in counseling, on the feeling level. Throughout therapy the counselor will be particularly concerned about your feelings. We live on a feeling level. Feelings are what make us happy, sad, anxious, or tranquil, and the counselor will be trying to make you more aware of your feelings.

## Honesty Essential for Success

As a couple participating in marriage counseling, you will also have responsi-

bilities. Your primary responsibility is to be as honest as you possibly can, especially in regard to your feelings. A perceptive counselor can pick up a great deal from nonverbal signs and may even be aware of feelings and facts which you have not mentioned. But a marriage counselor is not a mind reader. You will have to be candid so that he or she can obtain a complete picture of you. This is essential for the counselor to work well.

## Rely on Counselor's Experience

Do not let the need for complete candor discourage you. You do not have to have your problem clearly spelled out to the last detail. Many couples do not know what the problem is. All they may realize is that something is just not right in their marriage. This in itself is a valid reason to go to a marriage counselor. If you are confused, no one can expect you to have your finger on the pulse of the problem. Do not worry about it, let the marriage counselor figure it out.

This is the job for which he or she has been trained.

## Enjoy Luxury of 50-Minute Hour

If a couple come with an open and responsive attitude, there is much that a marriage counselor can do for them. Perhaps, the most fundamental service the counselor has to offer is the 50-minute hour. This is one of the few places in the world where you have an hour entirely to yourself to speak, say, and feel anything you want. During this hour, you do not have to worry about anybody else. You do not have to be concerned about entertaining the counselor or saying the right thing. You can just let yourself go completely. Here you can think and talk entirely about yourself. You can brag, cry, or laugh. By concentrating your attention completely on yourself for an hour, you are able to bring to light many thoughts and feelings which you never before were able to do because you never had the luxury of so much time to yourself.

When things seem darkest and your problems appear to be unresolvable, the marriage counselor can give hope. To have your problem understood somehow makes it seem more manageable. An alcoholic, who went to a marriage counselor, stated that for the first time in his life he met someone who did not judge him or preach to him, but who actually understood the craving and drive against which he was struggling. A woman, who cared for her sick husband for years, vented all her complaints and frustrations to her marriage counselor. Afterward she felt that someone finally understood the strain and sacrifice which she had suffered all these years. The counselor did not make her feel uncharitable or guilty because of her complaints. The counselor's simple understanding helped her to realize that such feelings were quite human and natural.

## Counselor Helps Solve Problems

At times like these, when we feel that there is no way out of our conflict, a

counselor can offer a treatment plan. This is nothing more than a general plan of what the marriage counselor feels the two of you, or the three of you, should work on in therapy. This in itself is very encouraging because what he or she is actually saying is "your problem can be resolved, let's go about it this way." This was the case of a woman who came to marriage counseling with her husband. She had been depressed for so many years that she had resigned herself to living that way. Then the marriage counselor noticed that she always felt she owed other people something and had to do what they wanted. She felt as though she had no rights or life of her own. Whenever she did what she wanted to do, she felt guilty. The counselor pointed these feelings out to her and suggested that in future sessions they could look more closely at these feelings and try to lessen the guilt which was underlying her depression. Even here in the beginning stages of counseling, the woman felt that maybe after all this time there was a way out of her depression.

Nothing is insolvable to a good mar-

riage counselor. Obviously he or she is not a miracle worker who can suddenly make a couple with financial problems wealthy or cure the physical illness of a depressed woman's husband. A good counselor can, however, help you look at your problems from a different perspective, assist you in altering your goals, and show you how to be more flexible so that you do not act in rigid patterns. Such changes are always possible no matter what the circumstances might be, and this is why we can say that no problem is insolvable. This confidence, based not upon false hope but upon reality and experience, is usually caught by the couple, and they begin to feel that their problem is solvable.

## Counselor Probes to Ease Anxiety

Many of us do not like to face our feelings because so often they make us feel uncomfortable. A marriage counselor tries to help a couple deal with this discomfort by gently probing at hidden feelings of guilt, shame, anxiety, and doubt.

He or she eases these feelings out at your own pace. The counselor wants you to look at them squarely so that you will be comfortable with them. The relationship between the marriage counselor and the couple is so important because in trust and confidence you slowly begin to let down your defenses. You begin to say and feel things you never said and felt until now. What you once feared in the dark corners of your mind is now less feared in the light of day. Feelings you once thought were lions, after they are brought out, become only pussycats.

## Counseling De-Terrorizes Fears

A man who struggled for years with tension and anxiety, neglecting his family and his health, admitted that he had a deep fear of being unmanly and inadequate. After admitting this fear, he was then ready to work with it. Now he could take a realistic look at himself and see quite plainly that he was far from being inadequate because of what he had accomplished in life. He was also ready to

take a realistic look at failure and to see what it really meant to him. The counselor gently confronts you with your fears, and in a sense de-terrorizes them for you. Once this man began to look at failure, the possibility of it threatened him less and less.

The same is very often true about guilt. Once a person begins to talk about regrets and offenses, instead of silently bearing them, they seem more understandable and less deserving of punishment.

## Counselor Helps Build Confidence

A counselor can also help people make connections, which they may not always see, between their feelings and actions. This is very evident with people who have a low sense of self-esteem. When they are in a social situation, they usually avoid talking and mixing with others. Consequently, they never have the feeling of being accepted or liked by the group, which reinforces their low opinions of themselves. The counselor can

point this out to them and work with them to break this vicious circle.

## What if Your Spouse Won't Go?

The ideal situation for marriage counseling is for the husband and wife to be seen together. This enables the counselor to observe their communication and to show each party what must be changed. He or she can criticize their interaction and suggest new and creative ways to express their feelings. The marriage counselor also probes into a couple's feelings about each other thereby deepening their awareness and communication.

If your husband or wife will not go with you, then go alone. You can improve your marriage by deepening your understanding of yourself and your relationship. Very often when the absent party sees how much their spouse profits from counseling, they will agree to go along with them.

If you have a marital problem, do not wait until it has been blown way out of

proportion before you seek help. Marriage counseling is not the last stop before the divorce court. The sooner you go the better but remember it is never too late.

## Never Too Late to Seek Help

Be honest with yourself. When your best efforts have failed to resolve the problem, it may be time to seek outside help.

Be aware of your problem spreading to other areas of your marriage. When difficulties with the children begin to cause communication problems with your spouse, when problems with finances create such a strain that it affects your sexual relationship, when constant arguing or bickering leads to an abuse of alcohol or pills, when dissatisfaction becomes prolonged depression, it may be time to see a marriage counselor.

Your problems are never too unique or too complicated to be understood. Very often with professional help, they can even be resolved.

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